

Sample 3: Out of Choices (excerpt) / Published Dec. 2016 / VICE News

It was a chilly afternoon in April 2013 when Roy Roberts, a former GM executive now charged with righting the struggling Detroit Public Schools, appeared in the auditorium of Oakman Elementary/Orthopedic, a school on the city's northwest side. Roberts had arrived with an entourage of district officials and he didn't waste any time with small talk. "We'll be closing Northwestern," he announced.

About a dozen parents were there, among them Aliya Moore, the president of the parents' organization. Moore's older daughter, Chrishawana, was in fifth grade and her final year at the school, where she'd been since kindergarten. Her youngest, Tylyia, just a toddler at the time, had become a fixture on the campus, often seen coloring in the back of one of the kindergarten classrooms. Moore wasn't sure what to make of the robocall she'd received the night before summoning her to the meeting, but she knew she had to be there.

Now she and the other parents looked at Roberts, perplexed. Northwestern was a high school a 10-minute drive south on Grand Blvd., close to where Berry Gordy molded a bunch of DPS kids into Motown idols in the '60s and '70s. What did this possibly have to do with Oakman?

"Oakman! Oakman! I mean Oakman Elementary, we'll be closing you," Roberts corrected himself. He had a list of six schools to close that year, adding to the nearly 100 schools that had been shuttered since 2009, when the state took over the district in an attempt to fix its growing debt. Perhaps he could be forgiven for the mixup. Still, it stung. Amid the district's constant chaos, Oakman, with its tight-knit community and accommodations for special-needs students, had never seemed in danger.

Rushing through a slideshow, Roberts said that the school had to close for two reasons: low enrollment and a need for \$900,000 in repairs. He told the parents that their kids could attend Noble Elementary (1.2 miles away) or Henderson Elementary (2.4 miles away) the following year. Even though more than half of Oakman's kids were special-needs, neither of these schools was handicap-accessible. Neither would provide bussing for the general education students. Both were on the state's priority list, falling within the bottom 5 percent of schools in academic performance.

Moore remembers leaving the meeting in a daze. How had the options gotten this bad? She knew Detroit's schools weren't great — the district had one of the lowest graduation rates in the country — but sending her girls to one of the city's dozens of charter schools or heading out to the suburbs, as some parents did, had never crossed her mind. She didn't have a car or a job. And she didn't have the money to hop around Metro Detroit searching for a kindergarten for Tyliya. She needed a good, dependable school in her neighborhood. Oakman had felt like a second home, and now this man in a suit was standing in front of her saying she'd have to find a new one.

"I'm raising my children in a school system that I loved, and still do, but I've seen it just stripped," Moore, a head-strong but even-tempered 36-year-old with a choppy bob and sleeve of tattoos, explained to me this fall. "The state supposedly came in to help the situation, but it just seems like they came in to strip it down to what it is now."

The gutting of Detroit's public schools is the result of an experiment started 23 years ago, when education reformers including Betsy DeVos, now Donald Trump's pick to lead the Education Department, got Michigan to bet big on charters and school choice. The Obama administration has promoted competition, but DeVos looks set to take free-market education policy to new heights. She has made clear her goal is to use charters to eventually get public dollars to private and religious schools, but the consequences of her school choice policy in Detroit leave gaping questions about how she will also care for America's public schools.

In Detroit, choice has come largely at the expense of the traditional public school district and schools like Oakman. As students joined new charters, public school enrollment and funding fell. Unregulated competition pushed these schools into near-unrecoverable insolvency and allowed dubious for-profit charter operators to prosper without establishing a track record of better outcomes for students. A 2014 analysis showed 17 percent of Detroit charter school students were rated proficient in math, versus 13 percent of traditional public school students. Last year less than 1 percent of the city's schools got an A or B+ rating from Excellent Schools Detroit, a local reform group that provides school information to families. Nearly 70 percent earned a D+ or lower, and 40 percent of those bottom-performers were charters. Earlier this year, seven Detroit students sued the state of Michigan for failing to provide basic access to literacy — two of the kids were enrolled in local charter schools.

“Even for proponents of choice like Excellent Schools Detroit, according to their own measurements, choice is not on its own promoting improvements,” said Thomas Pedroni, an associate professor at Wayne State University's School of Education. The premise of school choice is that competition raises all sectors, but in Detroit, and many other cities around the

country, that just hasn't happened. "What competition ends up producing is not a choice of failing versus good schools but a bunch of similarly mediocre schools."